

A Picture of the Age: 1849-1999

Written by Graham Citrine to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Christ Church

Chapter Five: 1949 - 1974

I find that as I approach the present day, the writing of this short series becomes harder - not because more is happening (the need to select what should be included or ignored remains as frustrating as ever), but because I feel that I am too close to events and I cannot put them into perspective. Consequently, my own likes and dislikes, my prejudices if you like, keep intruding. If I upset anybody, I beg forgiveness - you are free to disagree and to replace them with your own judgements.

The period after the 2nd World War was a strange time in Britain: there was, for a time, real hope and optimism that the new Labour Government, elected with a massive majority in 1945, would make life fairer and easier for all. Indeed, the National Health Service, introduced in 1948, is one of the great social reforms of the 20th Century. Governments, however, no matter what their political complexion, never have the power to make men equal, because human frailty means that some will always be losers, others will be winners, and the great majority will continue to face their lives dealing with setbacks and opportunities as they occur. Only in 'Alice in Wonderland' is there a race where everybody wins a prize, for in that Caucus Race all run in a circle - there is no beginning and no end, and runners can stop or start whenever they wish. By 1949 it was obvious that the hoped-for Golden Age had not come - the Cold War was now an unpleasant reality - the Russian blockade of Berlin showed that our former ally was a bitter enemy. The Berlin Airlift ended, but there was still a need for armed guards to patrol the trains as they passed through East Germany to West Berlin. (I had the doubtful privilege of serving as one of these train guards, travelling each night from Hanover to Berlin, stopping at Magdeburg to be inspected by armed Russian soldiers. We stood with our .303 rifles and 50 rounds of ammunition to face whatever the 60 divisions of the Russian Army could throw at us: the western world could sleep easily in its beds knowing its defence was in safe hands.) I have to say that I was not impressed by the Russian soldiers, they seemed to be without initiative, possibly it was fear if they showed any friendliness towards a western soldier - any offer of a cigarette or chocolate on our part was swiftly refused; their uniforms were extremely dirty, with a line of grease along the collar, but their heavy automatic weapons looked very businesslike. I remember, however, as we waited at the station, two small German boys crawling from under the wheels of the train asking for cigarettes. Cigarettes for the British soldier cost 1/- (5p) for 20, and I threw them 20 Capstan - with a swift 'Danke', they disappeared into the night. In Berlin itself the difference between East and West was most marked - in the West, bomb-damaged buildings were being cleared and new buildings put up; in the East there was little attempt to remove the scars of war.

Rationing continued and was to do so until 1953, eight years after the war ended - longer even than in defeated Germany, and long after the liberated countries of Europe had returned to normal. People had money but could not spend it - even if one travelled abroad, there was a limit of £50 in currency which could be taken out of the country. Luxury goods such as radios, televisions (which were now appearing in the shops), cars, etc. were largely for export. Massive U.S. Aid given to Europe in the Marshall Plan was used by Germany to rebuild its shattered economy, to replace worn-out machinery. In Britain it was largely used to fund the social policies of the Government - British industry continued to use machinery which had come to the end of its useful life. It is ironic to reflect that Britain was offered the Volkswagen Car Factory in Germany after the war, but

refused it because it would require huge investment. Volkswagen now owns huge swathes of the British car industry which in 1949 was second only to America in production.

There was a great demand for housing as newly-returned servicemen married and had families, but unless one was lucky enough to acquire a 'prefab' (hastily erected factory-produced houses, some of which are still occupied more than 50 years later) young married couples either paid inflated rents for a couple of rooms, or shared their parents' home. Some became 'squatters', taking over empty houses or even former army camps, forcing authorities to take notice and deal with their plight.

The new estates which were planned and built were designed to take the poor from the mean over-crowded streets of the inner towns and give them proper homes. But the planners were concerned with building 'housing units', not homes and communities. The Woodchurch Estate, offered as a paradise of open spaces, gardens, modern houses, at the beginning had no shops, no schools, no church and no public house. There was an excellent bus service to enable people to escape to their old familiar areas, but nothing for them where they lived. To the great majority of the people who moved there, it was a dream come true at first - people who had never had a garden now took a pride in their lawns, flower beds, hedges. While the children were small, they enjoyed the open freedom of the grassed areas, but as they grew older, so boredom set in - with no focal point, the estate had nowhere to take pride in, there was no community spirit such as had existed in the tiny streets they had left: at the same time, town centres became dead areas with no life after 6 p.m. Add to this the growing number of cars for which no garages were available (it was never considered likely that working men would ever own cars in significant numbers) and which were thus parked in the road and car crime became a major problem on many estates.

One major way in which this post-war period differed from the earlier one was, at first, the absence of revolt among the young. Decades have their labels - the 'naughty nineties', the 'roaring twenties', the 'swinging sixties' - these might be called the 'conforming fifties'. Young people did not resent their elders, knowing that they too had suffered in the war as much as the young. They listened to similar music - Bing Crosby, in his 50s, was as popular with the young as with their parents. One of the 'heart-throbs' of these years was a short, tubby, middle-aged singer who had sung at the Argyle Theatre in the 1920's - Donald Peers sang syrupy ballads in a pleasant tenor and was rewarded with a screaming army of fans, while the mothers of those girls smiled as they remembered doing the same a quarter of a century before. Clothes rationing meant that the young wore similar clothing to their parents, indeed most clothing conformed to the wartime 'utility' fashions which allowed no extra frills.

Another reason for conformity was possibly fear - the world had entered the 'atomic age', every newsreel seemed to show pictures of that menacing mushroom cloud overshadowing our lives - there was the fear that the cold war could become a 'hot' war, and this could mean the end of civilisation as we knew it. All young men had to serve in the armed forces, and in 1950 many of them found themselves involved in war in Korea. Fighting took place also in Malaya, Palestine, Kenya, Cyprus, as Britain's world-wide empire began to shrink. In 1952, Britain joined the nuclear club when she exploded an atomic bomb at Montebello, joined shortly after by Russia and France. The world nuclear powers believed that having the bomb gave them a voice in world affairs, though the world recognised only two 'super powers' - the USA and Soviet Russia. In America, 'McCarthyism' saw communism in every sphere of government and entertainment. Men and women suspected of socialist leanings were dismissed from their work if they refused to testify - the ideals of free speech and freedom from arrest were ignored. Even the President, Truman, was accused because he refused to drop the atomic bomb on China at the height of the Korean War. When fear is in the air people forget their differences and

draw closer together - the young people were not inspired to revolt.

In 1951, Britain organised the Festival of Britain on the South Bank of the Thames. A huge 'Dome of Discovery' was built showing a plethora of new designs for the 50's - some may remember the 'Skater's Trails' carpet patterns, bright wall papers, often orange contrasted with any other colour, contemporary furniture with spindly splayed legs. We saw the new 'action' painting - pure colour rather than stylised objects. To most people it was a case of "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like", and these welcomed Annigoni's 'modern old master' of the Queen in her Garter robes.

The 1950's saw the beginnings of new architecture - Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Sir Hugh Casson being the new designers. The Shell Building in London, a great slab of concrete and glass, was purely functional - to produce as much office space as regulations would allow. The new Coventry Cathedral was in complete contrast to the mediaeval marvel it replaced; in Liverpool, Scott's grandiose dream for the new catholic cathedral was replaced by the present concrete structure - 'The Mersey Wigwam' or 'the Mersey Funnel.' As it became known. When I took parties of boys to the two Liverpool Cathedrals, they were mildly interested in the Metropolitan Cathedral but were awe struck by the grandeur of the Anglican cathedral. It seemed that architects no longer needed to train in their skills - the ownership of a pencil, a ruler, and a box of Lego would be sufficient! Every city suddenly found its wonderful legacy of 18th and 19th Century buildings dwarfed by huge grey concrete blocks dominating its skyline.

The disease spread to housing - the curse of the planners hit our towns - huge blocks of flats rising to 15 or more storeys won awards for their designers, who steadfastly refused to live in them, and caused untold misery for their occupiers. Often cynically named 'Gardens' (remember Oak and Eldon Gardens in Birkenhead?), they were devoid of greenery, parents dared not let their children play out - they were too far away for safety, their lifts broke down, their unlit stairwells became places of danger - the small back-to-back houses built in the 19th Century where the housewife could talk over the garden wall, and watch her children playing in the street as she gossiped, and where every street had its small general store on the corner, were replaced by a new slum where families felt that they were imprisoned. Within twenty years these new slums were being demolished before the huge loans raised to build them had been repaid.

Changes began to come to the lives of the people in the early 50's, slowly at first, then with increasing and, to many, worrying speed. In 1951 the Conservatives, under Winston Churchill, came to government. The great war leader was now an old tired man in his seventies -he often fell asleep during cabinet meetings, but Britain was able to benefit from the restraint of the past six years. Gradually, controls were removed, goods became more plentiful, there was full employment, so that the call went out to the Empire to send workers to take on the jobs that the English did not want - West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis, came to Britain to work on the railways, the buses, to clean the hospitals, etc.

In 1952 the King, George VI, died in his sleep, A much loved monarch because of his courage and devotion to duty shown at his accession and during the war, he had been a sick man for a long time: I remember at the 1951 Trooping of the Colour he had been forced to attend riding in a barouche rather than on his horse, heavily made up to hide the signs of suffering on his face. He was succeeded by the young Princess Elizabeth, which brought forward dreams of a 'new Elizabethan age'. In 1953 Joseph Stalin died and there was a feeling that perhaps the new Russian leaders, vying with each other for power, would be more amenable than Stalin. The 1953 Coronation was heralded with news of the conquest of Everest by a British Expedition led by John Hunt: there was a real air of optimism that things were changing. The rationing of food, clothing, petrol, all ended: suddenly people could buy what they wanted at reasonable prices, and they had the

money to do it.

In 1955, a film, 'The Blackboard Jungle', came to Britain, and with it came a new music - 'rock and roll', played by a portly band leader, Bill Haley. In 1956, an American singer, Elvis Presley, was forbidden to sing and dance on television, accused of being immoral. Suddenly, the young had their music and they had their hero. Young people also had their fashion - the 'Edwardian look', with narrow 'drainpipe' trousers, long jackets with velvet collars, and brightly coloured fluorescent socks in greens, yellows or pink. Girls had 'pencil' skirts, 'winkle-picker' shoes and 'bee-hive' hair styles. A new word entered the language - 'teenager'. The old (and that meant those in their mid-twenties and onward) were separated from the rising generation by new customs, music, language, and dress.

Even the dear old BBC was affected. Radio still dominated, but even here the young and old listened to different programmes: the old continued to enjoy the traditional BBC programmes, but the young listened to 'pop' music to find out which tune was 'in the charts'. The 'Goon Show' introduced a new form of manic humour almost incomprehensible to the elders as their children answered them in the language of Eccles or Bluebottle. Young people were becoming independent in ways never seen before, not even in the heady days of the 20's. Then, those in revolt had been the ones who had fought and suffered in the Great War; from 1955, it was those who had been born in the war but had little memory of the fighting who had become exasperated at the restrictions of the late 1940's and early 1950's and now began to throw off those restraints.

In 1955, Churchill resigned as Prime Minister, to be succeeded by Anthony Eden, who immediately called an election, won by the Conservatives with an increased majority. It did seem that prosperity was going to continue and Britain could face the future with confidence. However, in 1956 this complacency was to be rudely shattered. In Russia, the new leader, Khrushchev, denounced Stalin, shaking the communist world to its foundations and causing the people of East Germany and Hungary to attempt to throw off communist rule. Very quickly the world saw that the new Russian leaders were the equal in brutality to Stalin - Russian tanks moved in to Hungary, crushed the people and the leaders were executed. The pitiful pleas for help from Hungarian radio were not answered by the West, for we had our own problems. In the summer of 1956, President Nasser of Egypt took over the Suez Canal from its French and British owners, intending to use its revenues to build the Aswan Dam - the USA, having promised the money, had held back when Nasser had refused to join the American anti-Russian camp. Anthony Eden, supported by France and Israel, determined to put Nasser in his place. By agreement, Israel invaded Egypt, whereupon Britain and France sent their forces to 'protect' the canal. Nasser immediately blocked the canal with ships, and the British action was roundly condemned throughout the world - not only by the communists, but also by the USA - it seemed that Eden had acted without asking American permission ! More worrying was the condemnation by our known friends - Canada, Australia and New Zealand - they would not support the mother country in this action. Britain made a humiliating withdrawal, a very sick Eden resigned, and the British were forced to accept that their country was no longer the major world power able to act alone in defiance of world opinion. It was a sobering experience for all who had known her supremacy in the past and which I have mentioned so often in these articles.

One of the results of the Suez Crisis was the formation of the Organisation for Nuclear Disarmament. Young people believed that the world was in danger from the continuing enmity between the super powers. In Britain, now that her weakness had been revealed, there was a feeling that she no longer needed the luxury of atomic weapons, or indeed of any substantial forces if she could not use them unilaterally. They took as their symbol a design based on the semaphore signs for 'N D' - the D shows the flag raised vertically, and N has the two flags in an inverted V. Many thousands marched on the nuclear laboratories

at Aldermaston, and it is ironic that at Christmas 1958 young people were imprisoned for protesting about war at a time when conventional Britain sang carols about 'peace on earth and goodwill towards men'. In reality Nuclear Disarmers were idealists living in an unreal world: most people realised that the bomb could not be uninvented, it was a fact of life. In 1956, the Americans exploded the Hydrogen bomb, followed swiftly by Russia, then by Britain in 1957, and France in 1960. New language entered the vocabulary - 'overkill', 'take out' a city; 'strategic weapons' were massive bombs designed to wipe out whole areas, 'tactical weapons' were smaller devices, equal to the Hiroshima bomb, to kill only a limited number - provided, as one General remarked, the wind was in the right direction and did not blow the fall-out over one's own forces. Neville Shute's novel, "On the Beach", was a horrifying tale of total nuclear destruction caused by the action of a small country over a relatively trivial matter. The leader of the Disarmament cause, Bertrand Russell, used his mathematics to show that with two countries with the bomb there could be the danger of one quarrel; with 4 owners, there could be a possible 6 quarrels; and as more joined the 'nuclear club', so the danger would grow. He reminded the world that only a few years before, a great power had been led by an insane dictator. The historian, A.J.P. Taylor, listed the probable effects of a nuclear explosion with regard to casualties, long-term suffering, destruction of habitat, etc. and asked his audience, "Would any of you do that to your fellow man?" After total silence, he demanded "Then why are we making the damned thing then?" The old certainties of trust and obedience to our political masters was ending for ever; people, even when they did not agree with the protesters, could sympathise with their actions and distrusted the honeyed words of their leaders: a new cynicism, particularly among the young, began to appear.

This cynicism took the form of satire in revues such as 'Beyond the Fringe', starring Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, Alan Bennett and Dudley Moore, when Britain's courage and unflappability in the war, the 'stiff upper lip' tradition, all became targets for the new university-educated breed of comedian. On the television, 'That Was The Week That Was' each week mocked the Establishment and drew huge audiences. The Government, under the leadership of Harold Macmillan, possibly the most astute politician ever to hold office, easily rode the mocking criticism. Macmillan had pulled the Conservative Party back from the Suez disaster and in 1959 had won an unprecedented third period of office for the Tories. His secret was his air of good-humoured calm in the face of criticism - when at the United Nation Khrushchev had roared and ranted and had beaten his desk with his shoe, leaving most of the delegates ashen-faced, Macmillan was heard to ask in his upper-class drawl, "Does anybody have a translation of that?" The roar of laughter which followed deflated the Russian leader and won for Macmillan the admiration of the Americans. In the 1959 election he made the statement "Some of our people have never had it so good" (later used by his critics as "You've never had it so good"). Most failed to remember his next remark: "Is it too good to last?"

Basking in the prosperity of the time, Britain ignored the fact that while our productivity had grown by 40% in the 1950's, Germany's had grown by 150% and Japan's by 400%. Wages had risen, but productivity remained low, we were paying ourselves more to produce less; Britain had ignored the chance to join the European Union and establish favourable terms, she was no longer the premium trading nation, in fact was rapidly slipping into the second league. Gambling became a growing obsession - betting shops became legal, Premium Bonds were introduced offering the modest chance of winning £1,000 for £1, with odds of its happening at several millions to one. Football Pools grew in popularity, with the offer of a £75,000 prize - most winners saying that it would not change their lives, which makes one wonder why they bothered to do it in the first place. Two films, 'I'm Alright Jack' and 'Heaven's Above', catch the mood of the times: in the first, the greed and stupidity of both workers and management lead to near collapse of industry and

consequent unemployment; in the second, the problems of a C of E Vicar trying to put Christianity into action by giving to the poor and trusting in the goodness of his fellow-men leads to chaos, near riot by greedy demands, and his subsequent dismissal by the Church hierarchy for his foolishness.

What was needed was some idealism and this seemed to come in 1960 with the election of John Kennedy as President of the USA. Here was a leader born in this century, who it was felt understood the needs of the young and its latent unselfishness. "Ask not, what can my country do for me, but what can I do for my country?" His words struck a chord with the young - again there was a feeling of hope in the air. In 1962, he had the courage to outface Krushchev in the Cuban missile crisis, when the world came to the brink of war. Following that episode, relations between Russia and the USA improved, the 'hotline' was established to avoid the danger of a nuclear strike, disarmament talks began. Russia's weak position was revealed when East Germany was forced to erect a wall in Berlin to stop people escaping from the Socialist Paradise of Eastern Europe - never before had any country been forced to take such measures to preserve its regime. When Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, it was felt by many that the world had lost its innocence. Subsequent revelations show that Kennedy had his faults - the huge build-up of American troops in Vietnam, his private life, his links with organised crime; but at the time he was a symbol of hope and it is said with some truth that everybody remembers where they were when they heard of his death, such was his impact.

In Britain, the Conservative Government was coming to its end after 13 years of rule: the Profumo Affair when a Minister lied to the House, Macmillan's illness and retirement, the vicious in-fighting among those who hoped to succeed him, led, in 1964, to the election of Harold Wilson's Labour Government and the dawn, it was believed, of the 'White Heat of Technology' plus the campaign by many of "I'm backing Britain", which unfortunately took the form of the Union Flag on carrier bags and even on underwear. The wish was there, but the drive and leadership were conspicuously lacking.

This was the beginning of the 'Swinging Sixties': Britain seemed to become the focus of world fashion and music . . . the phenomenon of the Beatles (Liverpool lads) introduced a new style of music which swept the world. In London, Mary Quant's fashion designs brought in the mini-skirt. Suddenly, to be young was the most exciting time of life: young girls in particular gained a new self-confidence as they allowed their skirts to rise higher than ever before in history and the introduction of the contraceptive pill gave them a freedom never experienced before. Unfortunately, far from giving young girls control over their lives, The Pill seemed to take away their freedom to resist promiscuous behaviour - they no longer had the excuse of fear of pregnancy to resist a boy's attentions. It became the accepted belief that if a girl had a baby outside marriage then it was her fault, for she now could control conception: boys seemed to disregard any responsibility. The result was a growth in unmarried pregnancy, single mothers and irresponsible fathers - hardly the brave new world hoped for.

1966 saw England win the World Cup in football for the first time - it produced a great feeling of euphoria. Footballers became the new sporting heroes, earning huge salaries. In 1960, following the end of a set wage for footballers (about £20 a week and tied to the club by contract), a victory won by Jimmy Hill on behalf of his fellow professionals, Johnny Haynes of Fulham and the then England captain was paid £100 a week - a huge sum for those days. " We pay it because he is worth it", said the Fulham chairman, comedian, Tommy Trinder. By the mid-sixties, most First Division players were being paid very high wages, football ceased to be a sport and became big business, with players being bought and sold at huge transfer fees - only the richest clubs could pay, and then only if they could enjoy long runs and, hopefully, victories, in the many cup competitions which now began. The FA Cup was joined with the League Cup, the European Cup, the Cup Winners Cup,

and probably more that I have forgotten. Britain needed her sporting heroes, for she no longer led the world in sport. To win one or two Gold Medals in the Olympics was seen as a triumph: the Games were dominated by athletes from USA, the USSR, and Eastern Europe. Mary Rand, a most feminine English athlete, was downcast at winning a Silver Medal in the long jump - she was comforted by the Russian Shot Putt champion, Irina Press, who kissed her, Mary felt the harsh bristles on the Russian girl's face as she had forgotten to shave that morning ! When random drug testing came in 1972, many East European athletes were never seen competing again. Against this, Britain's very amateur approach stood very little chance.

By 1968, the Beatles had almost become respectable - awarded the MBE by Harold Wilson, only their long hair aroused mixed feelings: their music was recognised as being special and their cheerful irreverence earned them an appearance on the Royal Command Performance. The young therefore turned to a more controversial group - the Rolling Stones, who were not approved of by their parents and who sang raucous, dangerous songs, openly flaunting their drug-taking and generally frightening the disapproving parents of their many fans. By 1970 there were many groups copying The Stones, the Beatles came under the influence of the Maharishi in India, there was revolt in the air. 1968 had seen a young revolution in France and the fall of De Gaulle. The Vietnam War was pulling in more and more US troops and this led to widespread and sometimes violent demonstrations against US policy. At times it seemed that young people were in open revolt in their dress, their behaviour and in their beliefs. 'Flower Power', 'make love not war', 'drop out', became the new slogans of the young. One of my favourite memories was the sight of the grim State Troopers guarding the White House as a peace march took place, and young girls in flowing dresses, with flower patterns on their faces, gently putting flowers into the rifles of the soldiers. The new anthem was John Lennon's song, 'Give Peace a Chance'. Added to the Peace Protests were the Civil Rights marches as thousands of coloured people made their peaceful demands for equality. Unfortunately all turned sour - State Troopers opened fire on students at Kent University, Ohio; the peace-loving Martin Luther King was assassinated; Robert Kennedy was assassinated; race riots broke out in the Watts district of Los Angeles; Russia crushed the Czech bid for freedom with its tanks; Charles Manson's Flower Power followers committed the most obscene murders in the USA; in Vietnam, more bombs were dropped than on Germany in the 2nd World War, and the use of napalm against helpless peasants horrified the world as it became obvious that the mighty USA could not prevail over simple peasants. The end of the 1960's was a time of unrest, of protest, idols of the young (like Jimmy Hendrix, Jim Morrison and others) were dying of drug overdoses; people talked glibly about 'rights', very few talked about responsibilities - the debt one owed to others or to society.

In 1970, the voting age was lowered to 18; it was cynically suggested that Harold Wilson had done this believing that the young would therefore automatically support the Left rather than the Right in politics: all the indicators of the time seemed to show that young people were wholly disenchanted with the Establishment and those who seemed to represent it in Parliament, but in the election called in June the Tories were elected and Edward Heath became Prime Minister. He faced many problems - British industry was in decline; strikes in the car industry; the collapse of motor cycle production; the collapse in ship building leading to the closure of the mighty John Brown Shipyard which had built the great Cunard 'Queens'. Indeed, the fate of these proud ships is symbolic of Britain's rapid decline - the 'Queen Mary' was sold to become a tourist attraction in California (many Americans assumed she was an American ship - they could not envisage Britain ever having the skill or initiative to build such a liner!); the 'Queen Elizabeth' suffered a sadder fate - sold to a business man in Hong Kong, she was totally destroyed by fire in 1972. The phrase 'Lame Duck' appeared to describe so many areas of British industry which were

demanding that taxpayers help to face foreign competition. People were dispirited, knowing that leaders in all parties seemed not to have the courage or the vision to make changes which were so obviously needed. Union demands for rises were invariably met, with no corresponding request for improved production; inflation began to rise as the wages tried to catch up with ever rising prices, leaving those who did not have the industrial strength (pensioners, teachers, nurses, etc.) to fall behind. Northern Ireland was a nightmare of civil unrest, with daily bombings, shootings, and generalised hatred between two terrified communities. Internment without trial, trial by judges rather than by jury, intimidation, hunger strikes - the list was growing and most people were wholly pessimistic about the future.

The decision to enter the European Common Market in 1973 was not greeted with any enthusiasm, indeed many feared the loss of freedom, but it was hoped that possibly Europe could pull us out of our difficulties, it being obvious that we could not do it ourselves. At the end of 1973 a Miners' Strike led to the Three-Day Week, with power cuts and the early end to evening television. It has to be said that in a perverse way the people enjoyed the crisis - my children cheered when the lights went out and we had our meals by candlelight! To many older people it brought back memories of the war which brought out the best in people: my auntie, armed with her bus and rail pass was able to travel freely around Merseyside seeking for candles and anything else in short supply - she loved it when she came home triumphant with her finds. We still have a large supply of the candles she bought then! Also, production actually rose in the three-day week - there was no problem with the people, all that was missing was strong leadership and courage.

In America, another leader was facing problems - Richard Nixon, leader of the Western World, was embroiled in the Watergate scandal. Members of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (bizarrely given the acronym CREEP) had been caught burgling Democratic Headquarters in the Watergate Hotel. In the subsequent investigation, many members of the President's staff, including his Attorney General, were imprisoned. His Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, resigned over tax evasion, and in 1974 Nixon himself resigned rather than face a trial by the Senate. Leadership of the West fell to the well-meaning but hopelessly inexperienced Gerald Ford, a man described by Lyndon Johnson as being unable "to do two things at once - like walk and chew". (A description my wife cruelly applies to me). In Vietnam, the USA realised its helplessness and was preparing the most humiliating retreat by a great power - flying its personnel out by helicopter and simply throwing the machines into the sea, such was the panic to escape, and abandoning all those Vietnamese who had trusted and depended on them.

In 1974 Labour returned to power with a minority government, dependent on Liberal support to remain in office, to face the myriad problems facing Britain in Northern Ireland, in industry, with rampant inflation and a dispirited people.

There is so much I have had to omit from this period - the growth of television after the Coronation (do you remember an advert for Gibbs S.R. Toothpaste showing a tube embedded in ice? you should do, for it was the first advert ever shown on British TV, in 1954). Television saw the temporary collapse of the film industry - Birkenhead had 17 cinemas in 1949, but only two in 1974. In the 1960's we saw the first episodes of 'Coronation Street', now the longest-lived 'soap' on television. The Arab Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973 with the west forced to take sides and leading once again to an oil crisis and a sharp rise in petrol prices - I can remember warning my pupils that one day they might see petrol rise to £1 a gallon but I could see the looks of disbelief on their faces, within a few months it had become reality; the conquest of space and the first man on the moon in 1969 and the feeling afterwards of 'so what?' as future landings failed to stir the people; the many hi-jackings of airliners; terrorist attacks not only by the Irish but by so many others who saw violence and terror as a means of winning - the Munich Olympics

spring to mind when Arab terrorists murdered several Israeli athletes; racial tension and often racial hatred in the Inner Cities; Idi Amin and the expulsion of Ugandan Asians; the ending of the death penalty; OPEC and the huge rise in oil prices - petrol rising from under 5/-(25p) a gallon to £1 and higher in 1974; the huge rise in the number of cars and the need to build motorways to accommodate them but the increase always outstripping the available road space; the obsession with planned shopping centres and huge supermarkets which made every town and city centre identical and destroyed the individuality of the little shops.

I shall end this with a note of nostalgia - we shall never smell again that scent of smoked bacon, rich fruit cake and cheese in shops with sawdust covered floors, and little overhead trolleys carrying our money along wires to a central point, or via a vacuum tube when a cylinder was mysteriously sucked up to an unknown destination, to be returned shortly with change and receipt, making shopping a time of interest and excitement for the young rather than the boring chore it has become. I regret the disappearance of Irwins, Woodsons, The Maypole. I miss Robb's Grange Road Store and its bentwood chairs for customers as they waited to be served. I do not enjoy the long aisles in ASDA, Sainsbury's, Tesco, with their plastic foods in plastic wrappers. I miss the atmosphere of the old Birkenhead Market, destroyed by fire in the 1970's - the market 'patter' of the outside salesmen was a source of real entertainment - today we see only glum stallholders waiting for people to buy, rather than selling their wares by raucous advertising. But there, I'm revealing my own prejudices and living in the past - a sure sign of approaching old age.